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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the need to assess the long term effects of composition instruction, a study was conducted to determine whether students could remember significant aspects of a writing course up to two years later, to discern their assessment of the effects of the course on their subsequent writing attitudes, and to solicit suggestions based on students' cumulative experiences with writing and instruction for improving writing courses. The study involved 11 students ranging from freshmen to seniors with majors in several fields, including English. Each had taken an intermediate or advanced course in expository writing taught by the researcher. An interview and spontaneous writing session was conducted with each of the subjects. As a tool for evaluating the long term effectiveness of writing instruction, this method proved successful. When asked to explain the invention techniques used to begin their most recent piece of finished writing, subjects mentioned freewriting, brainstorming, and outlining. Only three people mentioned the response of another person as an important dimension of their revising processes. Self-help tactics included reading aloud and handwriting or even printing a second draft. The most often cited effects of the writing course were more structured writing habits, better self-discipline, increased curiosity about writing and its capability for self-development, and an enhanced appreciation of the effects of audience awareness. Writing samples tended to confirm or elaborate upon oral responses. (HTH)

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CONDUCTING A FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF STUDENTS IN WRITING COURSES

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CS 208 537

CONDUCTING A FOLLOW-UP STUDY OF STUDENTS IN WRITING COURSES

The writing course is finished, the students have gone on to other courses, and the instructor thinks, "What happened to them? Did my efforts to create provocative assignments, to encourage active response to all phases of the writing process, to make insightful comments on their essays really do much good? What did the students remember most vividly about my instruction? What parts of it have they been able to apply in subsequent writing for other courses and in non-college settings? Must I satisfy myself with the thought that no writing course can be fairly judged immediately after completion because writing ability matures slowly?"

Those of us who work hard at teaching writing probably muse often along these lines. If we have formal student evaluation of courses, we may have reasonably specific, immediate reactions to things the students thought were positive and negative about the course. Perhaps we can cite instances of students whose writing changed significantly during the course. And certainly we have feelings about assignments that failed or that seemed to arouse vigorous writing, about textbooks that either flew or crashed. Some of us hear, indirectly, what former students say about our courses and perhaps use that gossip in some way to design a later version of the course.

Is this enough? We are after all, primarily concerned about long-term effects of our composition instruction. In rethinking and repeating our writing courses, we try to excise the least useful parts and emphasize the best. To do this, we need fuller access than fragmentary comments and introspection can usually provide. Might there be feasible ways to monitor students' reactions to writing courses several months or years after they have completed them, using the assumption that their most valid and productive introspection is more likely to occur after a gestation period during which the effects of the writing course have penetrated more deeply?

Fully aware of the obstacle of time that faces any writing teacher--one's current students seem to require all the energy available for attention to instructional duties--I decided that systematic follow-up of students in writing courses is potentially so important that at least a pilot study was necessary. The study had these purposes:

1) to find out whether students, paticipating voluntarily, could remember significant aspects of a writing course taken up to two years previously;

2) to discern their assessment of effects of that course on their subsequent writing and on their attitudes toward writing;

3) to solicit suggestions, based on students' cumulative experience with writing and writing instruction, for improving the course;

4) to establish a basis for speculation about the efficacy and feasibility of doing follow-up studies of students in writing courses as a normal part of writing instruction.

This pilot study, done in Spring and Summer, 1983, at the University of Washington, involved eleven students (from a pool of sixty-five) ranging from freshmen to seniors with majors in several fields, including English. Each had taken an intermediate or advanced course in expository writing with me between 1980 and 1982. Letters and telephone calls were the means for determining their willingness to participate in an interview and writing session lasting about eighty minutes. I conducted all interviews in my office, taking notes as students responded to my uniform set of questions. If each student was willing and had time to write spontaneously, that writing was done at a table in my office and in my presence. (The questions and instructions for the interview schedule are contained in the appendix.)

Summary of Responses to Questions

While slightly less than half of the students said they had done little writing since taking the writing course, seven claimed to have written extensively, principally in connection with other courses. Types of writing included the usual tests, essays, and lab reports, as well as short stories, letters, scholarship applications, brochures, resumes, and--for one student who had already written for money before she took the course --magazine articles.

When asked to explain the invention techniques they had used to begin their most recent piece of finished writing, five students reported some version of freewriting. Two mentioned brainstorming, which for them seemed to be a precursor to actual

freewriting. Each of the following techniques was cited by six students: the tagmemic chart, the pentad, outlining (the conventional form), the structure specified for scientific reports, riffling through the alphabet (e.g., What does the letter A suggest about this subject? B? C? etc.), and "research," which meant steeping herself in the subject through reading.

The methods for drafting that they said they currently used included many of the familiar strategies, though the amount of confidence claimed for each varied from little to great. These students tended to portray themselves either as relying on one or two tactics that seem to work most of the time--and therefore made them feel that they knew what they were doing as they drafted--or as performing the whole laborious process anew each time, with little assurance that it would yield a satisfactory result.

Some form of outlining was the most common procedure; one student, evidently still influenced by the five-paragraph essay structure, said that he always tried to structure each essay around three major points or divisions. Two students said they relied heavily on the freewritten material, one referring to it constantly while drafting, another pointedly not looking at it but relying on the grooves it had established in memory. One student said that he had begun to attend consciously to rhetorical maneuvers (such as tone) as he drafted.

Only three people mentioned the response of another person as an important dimension of their revising processes. Self-help tactics included reading aloud and handwriting or even printing ("so I can slow down and notice everything") a second draft from

the first. In most cases, the actual changes seemed to amount to tinkering with the draft rather than starting afresh: adding details, checking sentences for logic and balance, "working on the language," changing emphasis, and checking spelling and punctuation.

As they listened to me read a list of twenty-two adjectives which might describe the feelings generated during the writing process, students classified each one as usually applying or not applying to themselves. (Ten words from the twenty-two were positively toned, twelve negatively toned.) The four positively toned words chosen most often as applying were "absorbing," "pleasing," "gratifying," and "enjoyable." "Distasteful," "gloomy," and "dreadful," among the negatively toned words, were chosen most often as not applying. Principal choices of words that applied sometimes were "nerve-wracking," "unnerving," "skillful," and "aggravating."

When they were asked to mention words that most accurately expressed their feelings toward their last piece of finished writing, students most often cited "enjoyable," "satisfied," "gratified," and "proud." Close seconds, however, were "aggravating," "incomplete," "disappointed," "bored," and "disgruntled."

Most of the students paused perceptibly before trying to answer my question about memory of specific techniques of invention, organization, and revision presented in the writing course. The question prompted a sometimes fruitless search of memory banks, accompanied by mumbled apologies. After these

preliminaries, however, most were able to start describing certain steps and suggestions that had been given in class, such things as the pentad, the tagmemic heuristic (They found the term itself boggling), and especially the feedback given by fellow students in writing groups. Once they began these descriptions, most were able to recall many specific details about how these procedures worked, their application to at least some writers' processes, and feelings generated by their demonstration or use in class. (One student suggested highlighting or dramatizing these techniques so that they would make a more vivid impression, perhaps by analogy with certain factual or conceptual information that one would receive in a history or science course.)

When put on the spot to cite specific ways in which the writing course had affected their habits of and attitudes toward writing, students were more fluent, no doubt partially because they wanted to please me. (If I had been interviewing students who had not taken the writing course with me, I would probably have gotten more candid responses.) The most often-cited effects were more structured habits of writing and better self-discipline, increased curiosity about writing itself and its capability for self-development, and enhanced awareness of the effect of a fully-imagined audience on the acts of writing. Greater critical ability, more self-assurance, more conscientiousness about revising, and less feeling of inhibition and resistance to writing were among other purported benefits.

Recommendations about possible changes in the procedures and materials of the course were also a little slow in coming. Two

students thought more explicit instructions on "how to write an essay" would be desirable, if only to circumvent the painful process of figuring out one's actual subject and approach to a writing assignment. Most of the other suggestions centered on the uses of writing groups (which had met at least once each week during the course): more explanation of what should happen in the group meetings, group membership of at least five students, and more opportunities to read the writing of students not in one's own writing group.

The question about effects of the writing course on subsequent learning and writing tasks in both academic and non-academic settings proved to be somewhat redundant. Most students had said all they could on this matter when they cited the course influences on their writing. Effective use of time and positive feelings about themselves as writers emerged as principal effects. One student said he had "developed an ethic of working on writing," especically the conventional college term paper. Another said, with some amusement, that he now finds himself thinking often, as he writes and as he reads professional writing, about detailed uses of punctuation, such as dashes (previously forbidden in his own code of conventions) and the choice of one comma or a pair of commas.

Half the students said that they respond positively to opinions about their writing as expressed by people whose opinions they respect. Also admitting feelings of defensiveness and combativeness, they claimed that they then tried to use the comments as they revised; they haven't gotten over their

ambivalence about having peers react to their writing, though one student perceptively stated that other students seldom give useful feedback because they cannot give detailed support for their opinions.

Although most of the students were modest about expectations and ambitions concerning their future writing, the three whom I classify as the strongest writers among the eleven are ambitious: one plans to write three novels, whose subjects he has firmly in mind; one wants to write "a coherent Moby Dick"; one is currently engaged in writing children's books, magazine articles, and "short story writing to make a lot of money." (She already writes regular columns on astrology for two magazines.) Two students were looking no farther than law school, where writing, they have heard, advances careers. Three mentioned writing good letters as both a present satisfaction and a pleasant future prospect.

No one expressed the slightest displeasure at my interviewing them, though they had nothing to gain from the experience so far as tangible rewards were concerned. Several said that the questions and the need to articulate responses had helped them to learn more about themselves--what they knew about writing, what they had forgotten, and how formal instruction connects with so intimate a process as writing. Two students spoke graciously about the appropriateness of such a follow-up interview to the special relationship that can develop between writing instructor and student writer--one that is often more than usually informal and that involves a stronger sense of mutual commitment; partici-

pating in the interview reinforced the sense that a special web of values binds together people who take the writing process seriously.

Excerpts from the Writing Sample

Only two of the eleven students declined to spend twenty minutes or so, following the oral answering of questions, in writing. (Both had other appointments, they said.) My instruction was simple in wording, complex in what it could elicit: "Introspect on yourself as a writer--both how you write and the importance it has in your life." No one required much more explanation because the previous hour of conversation had provided ample pre-writing preparation. With the option of using my typewriter or their own writing implements, students sat at a table in my office with their backs to me as I sat at my desk. I made only casual and circumspect observation of their movements.

In asking for this writing sample, I had four main aims: 1) to obtain possible elaboration on responses made orally; 2) to note confirmation or refutation of oral responses (on the assumption that writing tends to commit one to beliefs even more strongly than speech); 3) to allow students to affirm, once again, the value and importance of writing, in a setting where writing is highly respected; 4) to secure a sample of writing done under controlled conditions for possible use in later research.

In illustration of the first three of these aims, I quote excerpts from six of the students' writing (unedited):

My first draft of writing seems always to be a confusion of facts and organization. Ideas are scattered between paragraphs, not always making an understandable essay. But I do it anyway--just churn out a first draft. When I have something I can look at that's concrete I can start the job of editing, reorganizing, rewriting, and elaborating the embryonic paper. . . .

After freewriting, I usually absorb what I have written in one reading. I try to involve myself in the writing, in part to get interested in writing, in part to better understand my thesis and point of view. . . . I feel a need to write well. Sometimes this feeling slows my writing down. When words are put in final form, one is commited to them. They cannot be retracted. . . .

Just as a performance by a musician is simply a representation of time (much time) spent in reorganizing motor nerve pathways so that they more directly connect to his feelings, a piece of writing is but a small fragment of a writer's mental reorganization. For myself, writing is the organization, affirmation, and reaffirmation of ideas and emotions. Writing is also a tool, a weapon, a responsibility, and a cure for many ills. . . .

Writing is a matter of extremes for me. I feel extreme emotions as I write--usually beginning my writing with lots of pain, and usually coming to extreme forms of pleasure as I conclude some project. I almost always feel great satisfaction with my product, and I am never indifferent about what goes on at the typewriter. . . .

Writing gives me a feeling of power, of having found my niche in life, of being validated for my opinions and mode of expression. If none of this junk were true I would still get the signal to write from my brain. (The "write" side controls that stuff.) . . . Usually, I feel overwhelmed, as though surrounded by ideas like in a flurry of hundred dollar bills--I grab what I can as they blow by me. . . .

What I want is of course to show-off--show how smart I am--be appreciated, all that jazz, but in a really short piece its a function of tricksterism, while in a longer piece, I feel its a function of tone--a sort of ambience the writer can establish with the reader. . . .

These students varied considerably in age and sophistication, but each seemed to use the occasion for honest introspection. I saw reiteration and elaboration of statements made orally and writing voices that were consistent with my stored impressions of their essays written during the course. Each sample ccnfirmed, in its own way, the rigors and the satisfactions of the writing process that seem to need rediscovery by each writer.

As for research to be done with these writing samples, several possibilities come to mind for studying drafting. How do relatively advanced college student writers launch themselves in a piece of spontaneous writing? What organizational strategies--and false starts--do they discover? What variations on tone do they employ when they know the audience is a former instructor but when they also know that the writing will not be graded and will not affect their academic records in any way? Do these students demonstrate ability to produce a reasonably coherent and fluent draft in a short time, as accomplished writers should be expected to do?

With a larger number of samples, drawn from students who had taken writing courses from other instructors than the investigator, answers to these questions might be fed back into course designs and expectations.

Follow-up as Normal Procedure

Doing this pilot follow-up student had only positive results. Since the conversations with the students were entirely

congenial and because they were spaced over several weeks, I was able to conduct them without feeling an intrusion on time for other tasks. They felt like a mere extension of normal academic counseling that every instructor expects to do. Students seemed honored and gratified to be asked the questions, not a little surprised that anyone in a large university would take that much interest in their writing progress.

Immediate uses of the opinions they expressed will occur the next time I teach a writing course. Two examples: I will devise a more thorough means of explaining, demonstrating, and practicing the techniques of the writing group (i.e., peer feedback to writing, occurring in concurrent meetings of intra-class groups); I will highlight, probably through written handouts, my suggested procedures for invention, organization, and revision strategies. I also anticipate using excerpts from the students' explanations of their writing processes to help future students believe that they are not alone in their confusion and suffering.

I believe any writing instructor would find comparable benefits from conducting follow-up interviews with a reasonable number of former students (perhaps 15 to 20%, as in my sample). Conceiving of follow-up as an integral part of course planning and execution can assure that it begins to feel normal. Even better would be to have most writing instructors in a department plan and conduct follow-up studies jointly. Depending on the level of trust and confidence within the department, it might be better for each instructor to interview some students who took

writing courses from other instructors (without attempting to preserve anonymity). By pooling that information and reflecting on its face-value validity, the faculty can collectively make inferences about desirable changes in textbooks, course designs, assignments, and evaluation procedures.

We have little hard evidence to cite in evaluating the success of college writing courses. Shouldn't we be drawing as fully and reflectively as we can on the people whom we most want to affect--the students?

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I acknowledge the numerous suggestions for revision of an earlier draft of this article from Deborah Woolley, Office of the Provost, University of Washington.

APPENDIX

Interview Schedule for Follow-Up of Effects of an Advanced Writing Course

1. Besides English ___, what college writing courses have you taken?

2. How much and what types of writing have you done in the past two months?

3. Explain the invention techniques you have used in your most recent piece of writing. What were the subject and nature of that writing?

4. Explain how you now proceed in drafting after (or during) the invention stage.

5. What do you do when you revise?

6. Which of the following adjectives apply to your feelings toward your usual writing process? Elaborate on the two or three adjectives that are most apt.

secure	laborious	gloomy
comfortable	unnerving	dreadful
tortured	clumsy	worrisome
painful	pleasing	indifferent
absorbing	gratifying	aggravating
nerve-racking	distasteful	enjoyable
delightful	skillful	
satisfying	agile	

7. Give two adjectives that express your attitude toward the last finished piece of writing you did. What was the title and what was the subject matter of that piece? What approach or perspective did you take to it?

8. In English ___, we discussed techniques of invention, organization, and revision of writing. Which of these techniques do you remember most clearly? State details of each.

9. What habits of writing and attitudes toward writing did English ___ most prominently suggest or reinforce in you?

10. What changes in habits of writing and attitudes toward writing did English ___ bring about in you?

11. Is there any procedure or any material used in English ___ that you now think should have been different?

12. In what specific ways is the work you did in English ___ related to subsequent learning and writing tasks, both in academic and non-academic settings?

13. How have you reacted to opinions about your writing expressed by people whose opinions you respect?

14. What expectations and ambitions do you now have concerning your own writing?

15. What feelings do you have about my asking you follow-up questions about your progress in writing?